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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ORGANIZATION OF THE MARONITE CHURCH

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¶1. (U) This report is a general overview of the Maronite community in Lebanon, to provide a brief understanding on who the Maronites are, how the Maronite clergy is structured, and what the responsibilities are of the clergy in Lebanon. A subsequent report will cover the succession to the Patriarch and a more in-depth look at the current head of the Maronite church. EmbOffs spoke to Bishop Bishara Rai from Jbeil and Carol Dagher, expert on Maronite affairs and representative in the General Assembly Synod.

WHO ARE THE MARONITES?

¶2. (U) Maronites are Christians who belong to the Eastern Catholic Churches, a group of Churches that are autonomous yet in full communion with the Holy See, and which recognize the central role of the Pope within the College of Bishops. The Maronite history extends back to the early fifth century, when Saint Maroun, a Christian monk, founded the Maronite spiritual movement.

¶3. (U) There are approximately eight million Maronites worldwide, over one million of whom live in Lebanon. There are large Maronite communities in Brazil (estimated five and a half million), the U.S. (three million), Argentina (700,000), Canada (100,000), and smaller populations in other countries including Australia, Syria, Liberia, Israel, and Cyprus. While its percentage of the total population in Lebanon is waning (possibly at 25 percent today), the absolute majority of total Lebanese worldwide are Maronite.

STRUCTURE OF MARONITE CLERGY

¶4. (U) Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, as the Patriarch, leads the Maronite community. He was chosen as the Patriarch of Antioch and the Levant in 1986 after serving as a bishop and then as the Patriarchal vicar at Bkirki. As the head of the Maronite community, the Patriarch wields influence in Lebanese politics and is consulted daily by a myriad of political figures from all confessions, who seek his approval or appeal to him for support. (Note: Cardinal Sfeir will travel to South Africa, the U.S., and Spain during the last three weeks of May. End note.)

¶5. (U) The Patriarch is one of five members who make up the Permanent Synod, an organization of four Bishops and the Patriarch which meets for one week annually. In addition, there is an Archbishop Synod composed of 40 diocese

worldwide, 12 of which are in Lebanon and organized geographically. The "nucleus" of the Synod is the Council of Bishops, made up of approximately 30 bishops worldwide.

¶16. (U) The Synod coordinates the appointments of bishops with the Vatican. Typically the Synod will compile and vote on a list of 20-30 individuals it deems worthy to become a bishop. To be included on the list, the candidate must receive a half plus one majority of votes. The list is then transmitted to Rome for approval by the Pope. Conversely, the Patriarch can consult with the bishops, soliciting two to three names from each bishop, and then send these names to Rome. Bishops are appointed to a geographic seat, though they do not need to be from that area. They remain bishops until they reach the age of 75.

¶17. (U) A larger General Assembly Synod consists of appointed members, such as priests and nuns, Catholic invitees, and observers from other confessions, in addition to the Patriarch, diocesan and honorary bishops. Experts on relevant topics, such as education, economics, and social affairs, are also invited to participate in the General Assembly.

FUNCTIONS OF THE CLERGY -----

¶18. (U) The Council of Bishops meets on the first Wednesday of every month. It deals with everyday affairs, such as ecclesiastical, liturgical, pastoral, and national topics, and issues a communique, which often makes a statement on the current political situation.

¶19. (U) The General Assembly Synod has been meeting twice yearly for the last three years. A number of committees, composed of experts, professors, writers, are organized by

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issue and are charged with presenting their research, for example, on education administration, during its sessions.

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